

# DEALING WITH THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE

*Blessed are they who mourn*

*For they shall be comforted Mt 5:4*

Dealing with the loss of a loved one is one of the toughest challenges any of us will ever face. While I had in mind when writing this article the loss of a spouse through death, I believe much of what is written may help us deal with other losses.

## **Naming thoughts, feelings and reactions**

A big part of grief work is naming our feelings. When someone close to us dies, we may be very surprised or even scared by the thoughts, feelings and reactions we experience. Hence, it may be helpful to know what thoughts, feelings and reactions are *normal* and frequently experienced by people who have lost a loved one, especially a spouse.

During a time of loss, we can experience a wide range of emotions with varying degrees of intensity. In a time of an important personal loss, it is as if a part of us has died. Many people who lose a spouse or best friend feel that they have lost their soul mate, the one with whom they felt emotionally safe. There is an unbelievable sense of emptiness - empty house, empty arms, empty heart. There may be feelings of anger at God for taking our loved one, anger at church, doctors, family, friends, boss and co-workers. We may even be angry at our loved one for abandoning us. We may be angry at ourselves for crying in public. We think we should be stronger. We may be jealous of others when we see that they possess what we have lost. We may feel a loss of meaning. Why get up and go on? We may even hope for death and may have passing thoughts about ending our own lives.

We may feel disoriented, off-balance, confused, forgetful, and unable to focus. We may think we are going crazy because we thought we saw our deceased loved one or heard his/her voice, sensed the person was in the room with us, felt like phoning the person even months after the death, or buying ingredients to prepare his/her favorite meal, etc. We may be unable to sleep and hence feel continuously exhausted, with little or no energy to do anything. Going to church, to the store and to social functions without "one's other self" may be very difficult. We may feel very alone and like a "fifth wheel" at social gatherings. We may be hurt by the well-intentioned but insensitive remarks that people say. We may experience a degree of moodiness and snap at people for no reason. If we live alone, we, most likely, will feel a terrible emptiness in our home. The

silence may be awful and the evenings very lonely. We may experience long sleepless nights. The loneliness may be unbearable. We may feel sorry for ourselves and ask over and over, "Why me?"; "Why did I lose out?"; "Why did God take my loved one when so many terrible people are still alive?" None of the above thoughts or feelings are comfortable. In fact, all of them are quite painful but we need to remember that they are also a *normal* part of the grieving process for people who have experienced the death of a loved one, especially the death of a spouse.

## **Negotiating fourteen challenges**

As we struggle to face and deal with the death of a loved one, it will be helpful to name some of the challenges or tasks that grieving people have to face and negotiate:

- 1) Dealing daily with the roller coaster of feelings - the sadness, loneliness, anger, guilt, jealousy, depression, tiredness and confusion, the endless crying, the emptiness.
- 2) Tackling the stacks of paper work and paying bills, redoing the will.
- 3) Coping socially - hating it when one more person asks how we are doing. Being angry if they don't ask. Going to church and social functions alone.
- 4) Caring for our own emotional and physical health.
- 5) Facing anniversaries, birthdays, holidays and other special occasions.
- 6) Disposing of our loved one's clothes and other belongings.
- 7) Visiting the cemetery or Memorial Garden.
- 8) Deciding whether or not to keep our wedding ring on.
- 9) Adjusting to the financial changes. This is especially stressful when the death of a loved one means a serious loss of income.
- 10) Relating to others. Death of a loved one can seriously affect the way parents, siblings, children and friends relate to each other.
- 11) Learning to take charge of all the "stuff" our loved one used to handle.

12) Living daily with what seems to be unbearable emotional pain. Facing the grief without denying it or shelving it.

13) Being open to meeting new friends and making a life for ourselves without our lost loved one.

14) Re-negotiating our relationship with God.

Perhaps you can add some other challenges/tasks to the above list and share them with someone.

### **Twelve important things to remember about the grieving process**

1) Grief work, though very painful, is good and holy. Jesus tells us: "*Blessed are those that mourn, they shall be comforted*" (Matt. 5:5). Grief is the way God intended for us to deal with loss. It is nature's way of healing a broken heart. The world's way is denial. It tells us to "move on" even before we have started to grieve. Grief work (and it is work) is the *only* thing that will heal our loss or at least help us to live with it. Jesus wept when he heard about Lazarus's death. His tears and ours are holy and sacred, and not something to be embarrassed about. In his book, *Life after Loss*, Bob Deits says that grief "*is the last act of love*" that we give to a deceased loved one. Deits encourages people to "*wear their grief with pride*" rather than deny it. Pain is, at least at first, the only thing that is left after our beloved is gone. We tend to want to hold on to it.

2) Each person's grief process is *unique* and *different* for at least two reasons. First, each of us is different. We bring to our grieving a unique history. For instance, we may or may not find it easy to *name* and *express* our feelings. We may or may not have grieved previous losses. We may have a history of facing or avoiding difficult issues. Second, each grieving process is unique and different because of the *nature of the relationship* we had with the person we have lost. Each relationship has its own texture and history, all of which will play out in the grief process. For example, a wife may be very angry that her husband kept her in the dark about their finances or never let her drive their car. Another survivor who might have shared everything with his/her spouse and might have gone everywhere together will most likely miss his/her spouse everywhere he/she goes. So while grieving people have lots of similar experiences, each grieving experience is *unique* because of who *we* are and because of the *nature* of the *relationship* we had with the person we lost.

3) The vast majority of people know little or nothing about the grief process. This is the main reason why people say insensitive things like "It's been a month. It's time to move on."; "You need to quit all this crying and get hold of yourself." Non-grievers want us to be over with our grief much sooner than we are ready. When they ask us how we are doing, they usually want us to say we're fine. Most people are uncomfortable with grief.

4) There is no correct timetable to grief work. Each person must be allowed to grieve at his/her own pace. People who move through a loss rather quickly are not superior and neither are they necessarily less caring. People who take more time are not inferior and neither are they necessarily more caring.

5) *Time alone* does not heal a loss but it gives us distance from a loss. Grief work *is* work. The normal grieving process takes time, effort, tears, prayer and the support of others. When we feel bad about feeling bad, we must remember that if we had a broken leg, we wouldn't feel guilty about taking the time necessary to heal. Why should it be different with a broken heart? Our broken heart also deserves its healing period - even if it takes several years. There are physical injuries that take several years to heal.

6) Grief work is messy and uncomfortable. We may take two steps forward and three back. Our grief will rise up within us at the most unexpected and inopportune times and places.

7) Grief counselor, Bob Deits, writes that "*the way out of grief is through it*" and that "*this is the most important thing we need to learn about the grief process.*" There are no "quick fixes," no shortcuts. Because grief work is so demanding, we will be constantly attempting to deny it and seek quick ways around it. We must keep ourselves motivated to stay in the process.

8) We need other people. Very few, if any, of us can do effective grief work alone. We do ourselves a favor when we let others in on our grief. And we need to be able to tell others that what we need most from them is not advice but a *compassionate listening ear*.

9) We need to remember that forgiveness is usually a very important part of the grieving process. This may include, with the grace of God, forgiving God, church, family members, doctors, friends, neighbors, coworkers, ourselves and even the deceased for dying. We may need to deal with and forgive unresolved past hurts and issues with the deceased loved one. (If

forgiveness is an issue, you may want to read my four-page article on *How to Forgive God, Others and Self*.

10) Religious faith may help or hurt our grieving process. Some people's religious faith tells them that weakness in the face of loss shows a lack of faith. Such a religious belief will be a big obstacle to grieving because it will consciously or subconsciously push us to deny and repress our pain. We may be constantly trying to show how strong and faith-filled we are. On the other hand, a religious faith that truly believes that God brings good things out of bad events may be very helpful. For many people of faith, a part of the grieving process is renegotiating their relationship with God. Like Jacob, we may have to do some wrestling with God (Genesis 32:23-32).

11) As we interact with other grieving people, we may judge that our loss is much more severe than other people's loss. We may find it hard to sympathize with folks whose loss is not nearly as bad as ours. If we find ourselves thinking like this, we need to remember that most people tend to believe that *their* loss is the worst there is. The important thing is that we honor our own and others' experience of grief and loss. We can say to ourselves: "I am experiencing grief and I need to honor it so that I can heal."

12) It often gets worse before it gets better. Many grieving persons are distressed that, three months into their grief, they are feeling more, rather than less, pain. The reason for this is that in the first months (especially in the case of a sudden death), we are in shock. Our body is numb and we cannot *feel our loss*. This is the body's way of protecting us from feelings that we cannot cope with during the first months of our loss. As time moves on, we begin to thaw out and *feel* all the tough feelings connected with loss. Also, during the first months we may deliberately keep ourselves very busy with paperwork and other activities and rarely take time to be present to our pain.

*Reflection Questions:* Which of the above challenges are most difficult for you? Did I omit any challenge?

Since most of us enter the grief process with little or no sense of what it entails, it will be helpful to occasionally reread the above characteristics of grief. In working with people, individually and in a group, I find myself constantly reminding them of one or more of the above characteristics of the grief process. At this time, take a moment to check which of the above characteristics of grief you tend to forget. Are there other things about the grief process that I have not named here? If so, please share.

## Helpful measures in the grieving process

Before I offer any concrete suggestions that might be helpful during a grieving process, I need to *emphasize* that no one can offer us any easy or orderly steps that will move us quickly through our grief. Grief, by its very nature, is messy and very difficult and, as I said before, getting over grief takes lots of *time, patience, effort, tears, prayer* and the *support of other people*. Often we may feel that we go two steps forward and three back. Having offered the above caveat, we can say that over the past few decades, as more and more counselors and clergy work with individuals and groups in the grieving process, most, if not all of them, will agree that the following suggestions are helpful.

- *Share your grief*

It nearly always helps to share our pain with others, especially with someone who will listen with a compassionate ear. It is important to share our story many times. We will learn early in the grieving process that there are people with whom we can share our loss and others with whom we can't. We will find that people, including good friends, do not want to continue to hear about our loss. Others may use the occasion to burden us with *their* problems. Thus, we may need to decide who are the people who are willing to listen to us talk over and over about our pain. It may be a good friend, an acquaintance, someone who has had a similar loss, a counselor, a clergy, or a grief support group. From personal experience in my parish, I can say without hesitation that a well-facilitated support group can be of enormous help during a grieving process.

- *Keep a journal*

In her book, *Widow, Rebuilding Your Life*, Genevieve Ginsburg, M.S., writes: "*Unless writing is an unbearable chore, every recent widow (and widower, we might add) should try to start a journal of her thoughts and experiences. Your early journal entries may be no more than the outpourings of your wandering subconscious and your tears on paper - even, perhaps, pages of aimless and pointless discourse. You'll feel better though, for having expressed yourself in quite a different way than you do with your friends.*" In and through the use of a journal, we give a *name* and *expression* to our grief. If we give journaling a chance, we may be pleasantly surprised how helpful it is. Many people, including myself, have found journaling to be an excellent form of self-therapy. In journaling we can also write letters to our loved one, to others and to God.

- *Be attentive to what hinders and helps your grief process.*

If we want to reach a particular goal, it will be good for us to know the obstacles and helpful measures along the way. In the grief process, one obstacle might be our tendency to ignore our grief with busy work and to show everyone how well we are doing by keeping a "stiff upper lip." Helpful measures might include any of the suggestions mentioned herein or other things we discover to be beneficial.

- *Read about the grief process*

Reading about the grief process will help us to better understand what we are going through. We may discover some helpful suggestions. The stories of how others survived their grief process may inspire us and give us hope. I realize that early on in the grief process, most people are unable to focus on reading anything. So we should read when we are ready and perhaps start with an article or a short book.

- *Prayer*

Many people find it difficult to pray during a grief process. But some can't focus or pray in the way that they were used to praying. Others find God distant. Still others may be angry with God. ("I am a good person, I love God. I am faithful to him and now he has let me down. What is going on?")

Don't panic! Every relationship, including our relationship with God, has its ups and downs. Sometimes we feel a strong connection to a loved one. Other times we feel distant. As with any friendship, we have to learn to hang in there with God in the good times and the bad. There is no easy way to do this. During our tough times, we need to be very honest with God about our thoughts and feelings especially if until now our relationship with God has been peaceful and "nice." For example, it is not easy to express anger in a relationship that always has been peaceful. However, if our relationship is going to remain real, we must learn to tell God exactly how we feel. He can handle it. He has big shoulders. Write him a letter. Speak to him from your heart.

In time of grief, we may find reading the psalms very helpful. Taking time to imagine Jesus actually weeping with Mary and Martha may help to bring God close to us. Picture Jesus struggling in Gethsemane, crying out to God with "tears and loud cries" (Hebrews 5:7-10). See him comforting the women of Jerusalem on his

way to the hill of Calvary. In other words, look for images of God and Jesus that comfort us and give us hope.

### **Signs that healing is occurring**

The following are some signs that healing and recovery are happening:

- 1) We can talk about our loved one and share memories in a more comfortable manner. While our sense of loss is frequently with us, it is not as intense as it used to be. We are not crying as much. Whatever sadness, anger or guilt, etc., we experience is not as intense; neither do our feelings fluctuate as rapidly.
- 2) We are beginning to create a new life without our spouse. For example, we are forming new friendships, doing some new things we didn't do (or couldn't do) while our spouse was alive.
- 3) We are coming to a place of realizing that, although life is not the same, it can be good again. We can let ourselves laugh and enjoy life. There are longer periods of time when we do not think about or focus on our loss.
- 4) We are building a life outside our grief. Our grief is not so engrossing.
- 5) We are beginning to see some good things emerging from our loss. We are discovering and developing inner resources that we didn't know we had or had neglected; e.g., managing finances, spirituality, our ability to reach out and help others, travel, etc. Our social life has expanded in new directions. We have made some wonderful, new friendships.

I conclude with encouraging and consoling words from *To Heal Again* by Rusty Barkus:

*This winter of yours will pass  
As all seasons do.  
There is no right way to grieve.  
There is just your way.  
It will take as long as it takes.*

Please share this article with people who are grieving the loss of a loved one. I'd also love to hear from you if you have suggestions for additions to the article. What are other obstacles and helpful measures to the grief process? What are other signs that healing is happening?

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